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DIGNITY OF ART.



NE of our most excellent living critics once wrote:—"We review the past, and seek in distant times and countries, that reflected inspiration which the spirit of the age denies us. We may liken it to the erection of a vast cathedral. Industry and wealth, with their myriad of devotees, are busy in quarrying and squaring the giant foundation stones, or digging the vaults. Science is occupied in discovering mines which are to yield iron and gold for the building, or pointing out proper wood in the forest; and Art employs herself in tracing the soaring ogive or lofty spire—in shaping quaint imposts and wondrous angel images, or staining many-hued glass for the

broad windows. Around, we hear the hum and clatter of countless multitudes, while afar, in their cloud-castles, sit poet and philosopher, singing or dreaming the lays and words of eloquence with which its walls are to resound. Let every man contribute what he can to the great erection—no matter what the material—*provided only, that what he brings be of the best.* The Great Artist who oversees the construction of this vast world-edifice, will find in time, place and use for all things."

This is a finely conceived figure, and happily illustrates the relationships which we have always conceived to exist between Mechanics, Sciences, and Art.

It is too much the spirit of the age to draw distinctive lines between trades, callings, and professions—giving preference to some and depressing others; until, from such compression, we have a *thermometer of position* where the standing of every individual is properly marked, and the temperature of his reception in the social world exactly given. A tailor or shoemaker is dotted zero; a President is as high as 212°, threatening to "go up" all the time—as almost all Presidents have done, of late. Between these two points the various professions and trades oscillate—the *exact* position, or rather figure, being indicated by the amount of money the individual may possess. It is no purpose of ours to disprove the correctness of such registration—we leave that to Messrs. Carey and Mills, who have long hammered away at the bulb of this ther-

mometer to break it; but, thus far, with poor success, for a shoemaker still seems, literally, to "stick to his last"—being rated 1. Were we editors of the "Awl Gazette," we should, most assuredly, claim for the trade a high and honorable position among the *professions*,—for what benefactor is more entitled to our confidence and respect than he who cheats the doctor and sexton by preserving health and defying the adverse elements? A doctor, at most, can but *cure*; while the honest shoemaker, like a wiser man, proceeds upon the principle that "an ounce of prevention is better than a pound of cure," and therefore seeks to avert disease. Is he, therefore, the less entitled to our esteem? And so with other tradesmen;—we should claim for them a dignity in proportion to their usefulness and general excellence, and give them preference over the idlers and drones who infest this great social and moral beehive, where each *ought* to perform well his part. In the great reckoning ordained by our Creator, it will be found, we surmise, that the shoemaker who has acted well his part is not among the lowest.

The critic above quoted assigns to Art the office of *adornment* rather than that of usefulness. The distinction is, with some qualifications, just;—it is the office of Art to do with Beauty; and it must, therefore, be judged by a standard of its own. The mason, and miner, and carpenter, and iron-worker have established laws which govern not only the pursuit

of their trade, but lie at the base of its principles, and from them there is no appeal. Stone in the wall must be "plumb," and mortar must be of such a constitution, else the building will tumble down. The miner must throw up arches as he throws down the ore or coal, else the whole mine would fall in. The carpenter must joint, and hew, and adjust, according to the design, else there would be not only no symmetry, but no safety in his erection; and the iron-worker must well understand the laws of the blast, the puddle, and the general properties of the metal, else the iron would come from his hands in a highly crude state. And so with all trades, and indeed with all professions. Invariable laws, founded upon well-established principles, prescribe their rules of action; and he is the best and most successful worker who knows most perfectly these laws. But not so, in a very material degree, is it with Art. Aside from adherence to truth in delineation, it knows no master, but lets fancy "run riot" in the great universe of visible creation. Is a cathedral to be ornamented? RAPHAEL comes in with his cartoons, TITIAN with his purple and gold, BUONAROTTI with his awful majesty; and they give to the walls and ceilings of that temple the impress of the godlike powers of the mind, for they create life, and thought, and feeling, which shall appeal to the soul of man so long as their colors have an existence. It is few known "laws" which they obey. Further than adherence to the well-established principles of the chiaro-oscuro, and to anatomical and physical truth, they are not under restraint, but combine and create, as they have the genius for their art. It is thus that beauty is wrought into expression; and it is as impossible to dictate laws for that expression, as to prescribe the form, and colors, and properties which the heavens and the earth shall assume.

Art is, therefore, a law unto itself, and each worker at the shrine becomes responsible for his labor to the great public whose taste is to be gratified, and whose sense of propriety is not to be outraged. It is true there may be "laws" of Beauty; but even COUSIN, with all his grace and practical reasoning; RUSKIN, with all his impetuous enthusiasm; ALLSTON, with his knowledge of, and genius for, his profession, have not been able to define those laws so as to render them apparent to all,

or even to the enlightened few; and after all that has been written, from the days of the Hellenist and the Roman to the latest work "On the Sublime and Beautiful," a greater indefiniteness attaches to the principles of Beauty, than in the age when Phidias and Praxiteles wrought their names into immortality. Such being the case, it is evident that the Artist has a latitude in his work not granted to any worker except the poet, who "paints with words" what the pallet would express by the cunning of its colors, combined by the hand of genius.

In consequence of this immunity, there is a dignity attached to the pursuit of Art which belongs to no other profession. The offices of Emperor, of Consul, of President, of Senator, become dignified in proportion to their responsibility, and in consideration of the fact that, in a great degree, they are absolute in their will. A Representative has less responsibility, and therefore immensely less dignity. The people regard him merely as an agent of their own, and attach to the service no very profound respect. The highest dignity attaches to him whose word is law, who is his own master, and assumes the responsibility of his acts. The Artist is Emperor in his atelier; no master restrains his hand, or compels the blending of his colors; his will is law, and wandereth where it shall please, by green pastures or by frowning Alp, by the fire-side or by the din and death of battle. His charger is a noble creature that careers with the tricky cloud, or over the plains, or by the sea, or through the forests,—it is his Fancy, and no human hands may lay upon its rein to curb it into obedience, except to its inevitable injury. Shorn of its independence, it is the cloud without the breath that stirs it—it is the engine without the steam of its life—it is the strong man, deaf, dumb, and blind,—and, no longer its own, serves stupidly the behests of others.

Such the possession of the Artist; and when he talks of his divine mission, it is with right; nor should it be regarded as assumption: for to make sisterhood with Beauty, and to give her expression, surely is no common office, appealing to our mortal and selfish senses. But, for all this immunity, there is a serious responsibility, and one to which only the highest and noblest aims and qualities of heart and mind are adequate. As the Emperor is held to a rigid accountability for all his

acts, at the great bar of public opinion, and in the pages of history, so the Artist is made to appear before the same tribunals, and to answer, with his reputation, for all that he has wrought and left upon canvas and walls. To appear before such a tribunal is no trifling ordeal; and most fortunate is he who passes to the seat of honor. The Artist who deals with low ideas, low subjects, bad thoughts, and keeps vicious company, never can discharge his trust well; and he must expect, if not the frowns of his cotemporaries, the sure fruits of dishonor for the future. A man may become a drunkard, and he excites our pity; but if a woman be found in the gutter, we look on with horror. So, if the Artist falls, we imagine Beauty to be debased with his infamy, and turn away with anger and disgust. The Artist who demands immunity from social usages and proprieties—who claims the right of genius to irregularity of conduct—is unworthy of his trust, and never can render Art dignified. The public has a right to expect a pure and upright life from the minister of the Gospel; why not a right to call for the same purity in the life of him who preaches to us from the ever-talking canvas?

If the "Cosmopolitan" has a mission, it is to familiarize the public taste with Art-works, and thus to render each one a capable and appreciative critic of the labors of the artist. Until this knowledge is imparted, we may not have our artists attain to the highest excellence in their choice of subject, their execution, and their style; while in their living and associations they may go sadly astray, presuming upon the "immunity of genius" of which so many of them, we deeply regret to say, prate. The effort to instruct the public, and to cultivate its taste, is one from which a timid heart might well shrink; but we have counted well the odds, and have undertaken to do our work with the hope of a grateful success. We may be years in fully accomplishing even a perceptible change; but the way is open before us, and we know it promises well. To be a minister of Art is indeed an honorable office; and Artists and their patrons, and the great throbbing pulse of the public, may rest assured it shall be our study to enhance the Dignity of Art.

